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ABSTRACT

At the University of Rhode Island, instructors in English and other disciplines are looking critically at the writing program. At present that program offers a range of basic, intermediate and advanced undergraduate writing classes--courses that are grounded in at least two sets of assumptions that deserve scrutiny. The first set of assumptions views composition as a basic requirement that students should fulfill before going on to other college course work: whatever a student learns in elementary composition is believed to be transferable to new material, new disciplinary thinking, and new assignments. The second set of assumptions centers on the pedagogy of composition (as opposed to rhetoric). According to Robert Schwegler, composition differs from rhetoric in that: (1) it focuses on the individual in the act of creating (while rhetoric focuses on a discursive field and practices that make it up); (2) it aims at the production of discrete texts (while according to rhetoric theory no single text or performance is complete in itself); and (3) it insists that students discover and embody personal meaning in texts (while rhetoric views writing as interpolation, a process of entering into a discursive field). A new writing program at Rhode Island would use the theory of rhetoric to make writing an ongoing process. Using the apprenticeship model, faculty would coach undergraduates over a long period of time, six to eight semesters. Group work with other members of a discipline would also be a part of the program. (TB)

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Survival Tactics: Rethinking and Redesigning a Writing Program during the New Abolitionism

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At the University of Rhode Island, there is a move to eliminate the writing requirement and thus to eliminate the large number of sections which support not only the writing program but most of the teaching opportunities for graduate students in the English program in general. According to Robert Connors, the pressures on our writing program are similar to those upon writing programs across the country, and this is the latest of several cycles of abolition-and-reform in writing for the past 120 years. Connors calls this round the "new abolitionism," because this round is triggered not only by economic stress on educational institutions in general or by changes in general education, but by a reformist mood within the discipline of writing, itself. In fact, we at URI *are* rethinking the nature of our own program. We are looking at the structure and assumptions driving both our program and our institution's curriculum. As a result we are redesigning all of our courses and our instructional support services, asking our university colleagues to see our new courses as "humanities" or "letters" courses rather than "basic" or "communications" courses, and asking our students to complete writing apprenticeships instead of basic writing courses as their "communications" requirement.

These changes result, in part, from our close scrutiny of the assumptions underlying the design of our writing program. The College Writing Program at URI is diverse and complex. We offer a range of basic, intermediate and advanced undergraduate writing classes, we offer a graduate specialization in composition, and we also staff a writing center, a writing across the curriculum effort, outreach to area high schools and a range of other services. In spite of this complexity, our underlying curricular design and our schedule of courses is quite simple and revealing of many important underlying assumptions. Every semester we offer about 60 to 75 sections of writing classes, about two thirds of which are introductory. In addition, most freshman advisors try to get as many students in writing courses as possible during the first semester. In spite of all of our services and layers of classes, ours is clearly a *first semester* program as proven by our schedule and by the perceptions of our campus culture.

What assumptions have shaped this condition? There are at least four. First, writing instruction is really basic. There is something that students must learn first in basic composition classes before they can be expected to succeed elsewhere. Second, it is assumed that whatever is learned in this introductory course transfers when students face new material, new disciplinary thinking, and new assignments. A third assumption is that this special thing offered in basic composition can probably be learned within one semester, even in programs where there is a "writing-intensive" course requirement that accompanies the basic writing requirement. A fourth assumption is that writing, especially basic writing, is a skills based, "how-to" class, rather than a knowledge-based class. We know from our conversations with faculty from across the curriculum and with students that all of these are assumptions are widely held by faculty, by college advisors, by the general public, and by students.

Challenges to common assumptions

Nevertheless, every writing program administrator and writing across the curriculum (WAC) leader can probably attest to the fact that many of our common campus experiences contradict the validity of these assumptions. We commonly find that students can, and frequently do, go straight from our basic class to classes in history, philosophy, sociology and other disciplines, and they write papers with the kinds of errors, stylistic lapses, and one-draft versions that they had learned NOT to submit in our classes. Thus, instructors from across the curriculum, even those who support WAC and have incorporated drafting and sequencing into their courses, may still complain about student writing with a variety of commentary: "Can't you do something more about the way students write?"; "Can't we institute an essay exam that everyone must pass to insure quality?"; "Can't you fight for higher test scores for our entering students?" Now, there are a lot of explanations for the fall-off of student performance between the papers submitted in a basic writing course and those submitted in other classes, including badly framed assignments, pressures on student time, unrealistic expectations of instructors who have forgotten the struggle to write up thoroughly new material. But there is also a strong possibility that the assumptions that lie below the surface of our curriculum design may not be valid.

Because of our own research on instructors' responses to students papers, and because of our WAC experiences, we see that most occasions for students' writing in academia are simply not at the basic or introductory level. We know, for example, that professors read papers—even student papers—for subtle differentiations of topic and discipline that could hardly be called basic or general. We have witnessed sociology professors read student papers for their differentiation from the field of psychology; history professors read student papers with an eye for a representation of particular details in order to reflect a historical era or time; biology professors read for the unspoken instantiation of the scientific method into the proceedings of a report. In each case, the professor expects the writer—even a student writer—to participate in discur-

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sive activities that call for disciplinary knowledge and specialized interpretive practices. Furthermore, as Anne Kimble Loux and Rebecca Stoddart show, these disciplinary instructors have normalized their rhetorical practices to themselves to the point that they see their students' faulty prose as a lack of basic training instead of as evidence of a struggle to master a new discourse.

We understand, then, why the transfer of skills and behaviors from the basic course to other courses in college is unpredictable at best and probably negligible much of the time. We see that the "how-to" nature of the basic course that privileges process over content, over content-mastery, and over disciplinary expertise may not be as helpful as we have been assuming. Instead, during the first two years of college at any rate, students are constantly and necessarily rebuilding their writing skills and processes of writing at the same time as they are getting a sense of a discipline, a topic, or a teacher's "spin" on a topic or a discipline. Thus writing and learning to write while in a history class are part of learning the topics and modes of thinking of history classes—and part of the processes of writing about history; similarly for sociology, psychology and so on. It may be that learning about and practicing writing are not completely generalizable but must be part of learning about the topics and mode of thinking of each discipline. Direct writing instruction that we expect to contain "transferable" practices must be positioned be differently in the curriculum and must be of a different nature than that found in the basic writing course.

University curriculum ill suited to writing

While we are thus wondering about the best place, position, and timing for direct writing instruction, we find that the design of the university's overall curriculum also exhibits questionable assumptions when it comes to writing. Our university's curriculum is, as is most curriculums, arranged vertically and horizontally. Some paths of study are laid out sequentially, semester by semester, i.e. math 100, 200, 300, supposedly with the mastery of content in one level leading to the next level, while courses on the same level are presumed to expand one's knowledge at the same level of skill or disciplinary performance. Furthermore, all of this sequencing is contained within 15-week segments, and students are generally grouped at the same level; a student at the 100 level doesn't rub elbows with the student at the 400 level.

This curriculum structure may work for some disciplines (math, sciences), but this may not suit writing and other performance arts (musical training, drawing, painting) wherein performance depends upon simultaneous engagement of ordinary skills, specialized practices, and high level cognitive activities all at the same time. We know the kinds of learning and time patterns that support this kind of performance in music and art. These disciplines call for repeated practice in time blocks not bounded by 15 week segments, a lot of revisiting and revising, a recursive learning structure, supported by coaching and modeling, nurtured by exposure to practitioners at all levels who are struggling with their materials, sharing techniques, sharing the search for solutions, and demonstrating the most basic and the most sophisticated cognitive activities. In this kind of learning, 100 level students need to rub elbows with 400 level students, and they both need to view and review, discuss and question expert performance. As educational specialist Lauren Resnick explains, we need room in our curriculums for learning as a function of social interaction.

This questioning of assumptions underlying our writing programs and the university's curriculum designs is pushing us to rethink the design of not only a particular writing course, but of our writing program. We are posing a number of questions as we redesign our program: if direct writing instruction does not necessarily need to be a precursor to writing in other courses, is there a better time, position and kind of direct writing instruction that should drive our program, and if learning about and practicing the writing process may not be completely generalizable, but must be part of learning about topics and modes of thought within disciplines, is there a role for a separate writing program outside of WAC? If the current design does not allow for the social nature of learning, then are there designs that would allow for such learning?

In answer to these questions, my writing program colleagues and I are redesigning our practice in two significant ways. We are deliberately shifting our emphasis away from universal and underlying practices to more specialized and advanced practices, and we are designing all of our support services to be multi-level and social rather than horizontal and isolated. My colleague Robert Schwegler explains this as a shift away from a compositionist approach (as it has been conceived over the last 15 to 20 years) towards rhetoric approach. For Schwegler, composition differs from rhetoric in at least four crucial ways. First, according to Schwegler, composition focuses on the individual writer in the act of composing, while rhetoric focuses on a discursive field and the practices that make it up, the major texts and minor texts, and the social or cultural exigencies of discourse. Second, composition aims at the production of more or less discrete texts, while from the rhetorical perspective, no single text or other performance is fully complete or sufficient in itself. All performances are connected and only partially completed, all part of an interlocked conversational field. Third, composition insists that students discover and embody personal meaning in texts, and a good portion of composition teaching helps students choose strategies that guide readers' understanding of these statements, while rhetoric helps students recognize that they are being inserted—or interpolated—into an ongoing arrangement of knowledge, power, and practice. The distinguishing act of rhetoric, says Schwegler, is interpolation, a consciousness of entering into and being constituted by a discursive field.

While these differences between a compositionist's and rhetorician's view of text are extremely theoretical, we believe they have profound implications for practice. Right now, in practice, our writing program is a composition program. This means our courses are framed upon increasingly sophisticated versions of the writing process and our support services (such as our writing center) are basic and private. For example, our advanced course is a more in-depth version of our basic course, calling for longer, more subtly written and rhetorically similar papers, produced out of the same but longer writing processes. Instead, we are shifting to writing classes based on the study of a rhetorical or discursive field. We envision writing classes based on specific disciplinary or topical content that makes plain the nature of the field's public discourse, its unspoken methods and assumptions, and its social constructs, all of which would shape the relevant writing processes and products. While advanced courses would draw upon basic courses within rhetorical or discursive fields, we would not assume an easy transfer of skills, knowledge, or performance across fields. Expertise in one discourse would not guarantee expertise in another; writers would

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have to learn the rhetorical field.

These new courses would be different from the many writing-in-the-disciplines courses which were tried ten to fifteen years ago at many institutions in the first flush of WAC. In those courses, writing was either an add-on to a disciplinary course (a one-credit writing class added to a history lecture, for example), or writing was presented as the study of paper formats, such as the laboratory report or the case study, formats that were practiced and preached apart from topical concerns and separate from the web of discursive and disciplinary arrangements which produced the writing. In both cases writing was taught by a non-specialist writing instructor. We are not surprised that these courses did not succeed. They were based on the same assumptions as the basic course: an individualized practice where learning a form would transfer to other conditions. Our courses, however, embed form and process within topics and within a web of discursive occasions that produce the writing. These conditions, topics and formats must be studied, articulated and practiced with students. They are a specialized and critical study that lead to specialized, critical and productive rhetoric courses. These rhetoric courses belong in the letters and humanities portion of the university's curriculum rather than in the skills and basic portion of the curriculum.

This shifting our courses into a new university category also allows us to redesign our basic skills services, too, shifting them away from compositionist practices to rhetorical practices. For example, our Writing Center currently services students exclusively through one-on-one tutorials offered by generalist tutors, all of whom follow the same process-based procedure, regardless of topic or discipline. Thus, our Writing Center is modeled on composition practices. Instead, we are creating opportunities for more social and rhetorical practices. We are moving toward group tutorials, led by knowledgeable students who share their writing and thinking in the discipline, and we will have professors from across the curriculum come to the Center to model their writing for their students. We see this as public tutoring and an opening-up of expert practice to novice practitioners.

Using the apprenticeship model

We are deliberately modeling this kind of public and social teaching upon apprenticeships, which, according to Allan Collins, John Seely Brown and Susan E. Newman, "is the way we learn most naturally." Certainly apprenticeships, although problematic historically, offer at least five conditions that nurture skills-learning. First, apprenticeships demand a long term commitment to learning a skill or set of practices; one does not become a potter in 15 weeks. Second, apprenticeships present expert practice while parceling skills tasks into small pieces. The student repeatedly sees experts in action but practices basic tasks. No one expects or demands an apprentice to perform like an expert. Third, apprenticeships are a public practice in a social and communal setting. Practitioners at all levels of skill and performance operate in public by sharing, discussing, and performing in front of each other, allowing for extended observation, imitation, questioning and clarifying discussion. Fourth, apprenticeships provide learning in context. The complex tasks to be learned are not abstracted nor are they remediated and artificially separated from the product. The entire complex task is practiced in context. Collins, Brown and Newman argue that this encourages a full conceptual model of the skills and knowledge needed for performance and expertise. Fifth, Collins, Brown and Newman point out that the social nature of apprenticeships provides a rich variety of models and, thus, offers options in performance and interpretation within any skills area.

A number of educational psychologists have developed several operational models of aspects of apprenticeships that are designed to aid the learning of complex tasks, including reading, writing and math. All of these are based on important apprenticeship practices, including the direct modeling of expert processes; cooperative learning, especially group work and collaboration; a lot of individualized coaching during practice; instruction that diminishes or "fades" as expertise increases; and opportunities for reflection upon one's performance. For example, Collins, Brown and Newman call for a form of apprenticeship called "situated learning" presented amidst a "culture of expert practice" that is dependent upon cooperative learning strategies. In situated learning, an activity like reading or math is embedded in its full array of skills and modeled in its full complexity—in total and actual use. Expertise is modeled, showing how experts think and work with problems that are truly puzzling and showing how an expert adapts knowledge and skill to new situations. In addition, cooperative learning strategies, peer tutoring and group activities support an active engagement within a students at a variety of levels.

At URI we are intrigued with these adaptations of apprenticeships, and we intend to offer writing apprenticeships to students who take our new rhetoric offerings. Ideally, upon entering the university students are assigned to a writing instructor with whom they have contact for 4, 6 or even 8 semesters; this instructor not only tutors individually, but also arranges workshops among students at similar levels and/or vertically different levels. These workshops offer skills practice, extensive practice in revision strategies, and contrastive studies of writing in different classes and disciplines. We are also considering masterclasses encouraging professors in all disciplines to practice their disciplinary activity and writing in public. Workshops and masterclasses are meant to lead to collaborative essays that explain and compare ways of thinking, organizing, perceiving and writing from topical or disciplinary perspectives. Finally, the apprenticeship culminates with the creation of a writing portfolio, the contents of which represent not only the student's best writing, but also the range of study and learning with which the student has been engaged. As a key to this apprenticeship we hope to take advantage of the new community service courses that will allow upperclassmen to engage in "journeyman" roles in order to help freshmen and sophomores who are beginning their writing apprenticeships.

We recognize that ours is an ambitious and risky plan. Our idealized vision of a writing apprenticeships is highly dependent upon student motivation, upon teachers who are able and willing to externalize expert practice, and upon flexibility in the awarding of credit and scheduling at the university. In addition, our attempt to resituate our courses in a different curriculum category will depend upon our success in changing our campus culture's attitude toward writing in general. Nevertheless, we are committed to these changes, because, to quote David Bartholomae, "It makes foremost the situatedness of writing, . . . outlining in red the network of affiliations that constitute writing in the academy." We will find ways to

shift our focus from composition to rhetoric with advanced studies in culture and discourse. Also, drawing on our successes in WAC and the writing center, and keeping apprenticeships and internships in mind, we will finds ways to make our campus culture recognize that the writing demanded on campus is an advanced practice, that writing achievement is the end product of several years of practice, and that writing is a performance which should be nurtured publicly, with beginner, novice and expert rubbing elbows.

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